DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 514 EA 017 963

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Lindelow, John |
| TITLE | The Grade Retention/Social Promotion Debate. |
| INSTITUTION | ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.; National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA. |
| SPONS AGENCY | National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC. |
| PUB DATE | Nov 85 |
| CONTRACT | 400-83-0013 |
| NOTE | 6p. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Publication Sales, National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke Street, Arlington, VA 22314 ($2.00, prepaid; quantity discounts). |
| PUB TYPE | Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) |
| JOURNAL CIT | Research Roundup; v2 n1 Nov 1985 |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Academic Failure; Age Grade Placement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Grade Repetition; Grades (Scholastic); Learning Problems; *Low Achievement; Preschool Education; Research Needs; Student Improvement; Student Placement; *Student Promotion; Underachievement |
| IDENTIFIERS | Aumsville School District OR; Austin Independent School District TX; Pinellas County School System FL |

ABSTRACT

This publication focuses on the retention/promotion debate regarding failing and low-achieving students. An introductory essay describes the inherent limitation in the research done on this issue--the impossibility of obtaining an appropriate control group--and suggests that the retention/promotion quandary can best be resolved by accommodating the present educational system to the special needs of low-achieving students. Thereafter, five recent studies on this issue are summarized and reviewed. The first, by Doug Chafe, is a review of the literature on criteria for retention or promotion. The second, by Jane K. Elligett and Thomas S. Tocco, describes the stringent promotion/retention policy in Pinellas County, Florida, and analyzes its results. The third, by Nancy B. Schuyler, is a technical report from the Austin (Texas) Independent School District on its new stringent promotion/retention policy at the elementary level. Fourth is a California study, by Jonathan Sandoval and G. Penee Hughes, that analyzed a wide variety of indicators to determine predictors of success for retained first-grade students. The final study, by Marilyn Pheasant, describes a first-grade readiness program at the Aumsville (Oregon) School District. ERIC document numbers are noted. (TE)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED260514

R·E·S·E·A·R·C·H roundup

Volume 2, Number 1 November 1985

# The Grade Retention/Social Promotion Debate

John Lindelow

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EA 017 963

R·E·S·E·A·R·C·H roundup

Volume 2, Number 1 November 1985

# The Grade Retention/Social Promotion Debate

John Lindelow

In a multilevel educational system geared to each level's average student, some students will inevitably fall outside the normal range of the bell-shaped performance curve. The extreme cases are put into special education or gifted curriculums.

For the not-so-extreme cases on the bottom slope of the curve, however, fate is not so kind. Even though most of these students will fail in a school's regular educational curriculum, they do not qualify for what is currently defined as special education. These borderline students are the genesis of the retention/promotion debate.

The graded educational system demands that students be put into one grade or another. Faced at the end of the term by students who are failing, teachers have two choices—they can retain these students in the same grade for another year, and so brand them as failures; or they can promote them to the next grade, despite the fact they are inadequately prepared to handle the work there.

Since the early 1900s, researchers have been attempting to help administrators deal with this quandary. However, the fifty or so studies that have been done on this subject—including very recent ones—have without exception suffered from a fundamental design flaw that disallows drawing meaningful conclusions from them. It is this: Because of educators' understandable reluctance to allow low-achieving students to be placed in retained or promoted groups on a random basis, these studies lack appropriate control groups from which valid comparisons of retention and promotion could be made.

This limitation, however, has not dissuaded researchers from conducting a variety of studies based on flawed designs, and as a consequence, producing results skewed to one side or another of the retention/promotion debate. In his excellent review of the situation, Chafe describes many of these studies and their flaws.

Policies adopted by two school districts are described in separate studies by Schuyler (Austin, Texas) and Elligett and Tocco (Pinellas County, Florida).

The sorry truth about the retention/promotion debate is that it seems destined to continue without a clear solution—no matter how much comparative research with good controls is done—unless the graded educational system is significantly altered. The question of retention would not arise in an individualized educational system, and here may lie the key to solving the retention/promotion quandary: accommodating the present educational system to the special needs of low-achieving students so they do not continue to fail wherever they are placed. Such an adjustment appears to be drawing more and more support from researchers and educators alike.

Chafe suggests some intermediate form of special education for low-achieving students who are also emotionally or socially maladjusted, while Sandoval and Hughes caution that "retention should not be used as a substitute for special education." Pheasant describes a "readiness first grade" in Aumsville, Oregon, that bridges the gap between special ed and regular first grade and attempts to nip failure in the bud.

For the majority of retained students, what didn't work the first time doesn't work the second time, either, and most of these unfortunate students continue to meet failure wherever they are placed. The only real solution appears to be an expansion of the concept of special education so that low-achieving students receive the individualized educational programs they need.

John Lindelow is research analyst and writer, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon.

Prepared by ERIC® Clearinghouse on Educational Management

EA 017 963

**1 Chafe, Doug.** *Grade Retention: Research, Policies, and Decision Making.* Prepared by the Research, Evaluation, and Accreditation Committee of the San Mateo County Office of Education, May 1984. 26 pages. ED 245 349.

What does research have to say about the retention/promotion debate? How are districts and schools making retention decisions? What tools and criteria can be used by administrators and teachers to help make retention decisions? In this review, Chafe concisely summarizes the literature relevant to these and other basic questions.

He first traces the practice of grade retention from its origins in the initial graded schools to its almost universal practice today. Grade retention was a popular practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Research in the 1930s, though, began to question its value, and the practice fell off steadily until the late 1970s, when the back-to-basics movement returned it to popularity.

A great deal of research has been done to assess the effects of grade retention. "Unfortunately," Chafe concludes, "most of this research suffers from poor methodology. The flaws in the research design of most of the studies make their conclusions suspect and the results often contradictory." Chafe goes on to detail how virtually every recent study contrasting promotion and retention is inherently biased toward one practice or another. Despite these major design flaws, some meaningful conclusions *can* be derived from these studies.

Conclusions from studies focusing on academic achievement, he notes, often are simply reflections of their design flaws: retained students are likely to show improvement when measured against the norms of the grade they are repeating, and decline when measured against the performance of similarly skilled students who were promoted. A more meaningful finding is that gains made by retained students relative to new, younger classmates tend to disappear in later years. Retention alone "does not teach the child how to become a better student, so gains are not likely to be permanent."

Studies focusing on student self-concept and social adjustment exemplify the classic chicken-egg paradox—in the final analysis, they fail to determine a cause and effect relationship. Retainees may have low self-concepts because they fail, or they may fail because they have low self-concepts.

Some retention decisions are based primarily on the perceived "immaturity" of young (usually first-grade) children. Studies of such retentions have concluded, in general, that children benefit most from retention when they are simply developmentally or chronologically immature but are otherwise normal. Although this conclusion sounds reasonable, Chafe cautions that none of these studies used control groups, and thus they were inherently "biased towards showing the benefits of retention."

Some studies have avoided directly comparing promotion and retention and have instead sought to determine the charateristics of successful repeaters. Retention appears to work best for students in the lower grades who are socially and emotionally stable and "who possess some academic skills, but not enough to enable them to compete successfully in the next higher grade." Students who are extremely deficient in academic skills and/or have social or emotional problems are not well served by retention. "Some form of special education may be preferable," Chafe advises.

Given its equivocal nature, the retention/promotion research to date offers few concrete guidelines for administrative decision making. Principals, counselors, and teachers must depend instead on experience and good judgment. To help in this process, several authors have prepared decision-making aids—essentially lists of student traits and comments about them that might be taken into account when making retention decisions. Chafe notes that they "emphasize making retention decisions based on the unique factors present in each case."

Chafe concludes his review with a discussion of various studies that have examined the retention policies of individual districts and schools. The best of these policies, Chafe states, set forth broad research-based guidelines and recognize that retention decisions should be based on a wide range of factors with the interest of the individual student as the basic consideration.

**2 Elligett, Jane K., and Tocco, Thomas S.** "The Promotion/Retention Policy in Pinellas County, Florida." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 64, 10 (June 1983), pp. 733-735. EJ 283 860.

One of the major issues connected with giving students "social promotions" is that they will tend to amass large and irremediable academic deficits. In response to this and other concerns, the Pinellas County School District in 1977 adopted a new, stringent promotion/retention policy for its 88 elementary and middle schools. Elligett and Tocco here explain this


About ERIC

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system operated by the National Institute of Education. ERIC serves educators by disseminating research results and other resource information that can be used in developing more effective educational programs.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, one of several such units in the system, was established at the University of Oregon in 1966.

Prior to publication, this manuscript was submitted to the National Association of Elementary School Principals for critical review and determination of professional competence. The publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of NAESP.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

This publication was prepared with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-83-0013. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.

policy and statistically analyze the progress of retained students. They claim, with some caveats, that the new retention policy has produced substantial gains in academic achievement for retained pupils.

The new policy bases promotion primarily on the results of standardized tests. Students become candidates for retention if they fall below a level that ranges from a half-year behind in grade 1 to a year-and-a-half behind in grade 5. A degree of flexibility is provided in that for well-documented reasons a principal may promote students who fall below the minimum or retain students who are above it.

In analyzing the results of the new policy, Elligett and Tocco acknowledge that their research design contains flaws, primarily in "the absence of a genuine control group" with which to compare retained students. They also concede that test scores of retained students measured against the norm of the grade they just repeated "are bound to improve if they have learned *anything at all* during the year of retention."

Elligett and Tocco sought to overcome the latter limitation by looking "at gains made by retained students during the year *after* they had repeated a grade, when they had been promoted to a higher grade level." The results, they say, show that the performance of retained pupils did appear to substantially improve "between the year prior to retention and the year following promotion." For example, retained fourth graders were ranked at the 11th percentile of their class in reading comprehension in the year before their retention. Following a year of retention and a year of regular fifth-grade enrollment, these students were ranked at the 25th percentile of the fifth-grade class. These improvements were consistently greater in the earlier grades, the researchers said, and greater for math scores than for reading scores.

Elligett and Tocco conclude that such substantial improvements very likely indicate "a genuine increase in achievement that is directly related to the benefits of a year of retention."

## 3 Schuyler, Nancy Baenen. *Retention and Promotion, 1982-83. Final Technical Report.* Austin, Texas: Austin Independent School District, Office of Research and Evaluation, July 1983. 254 pages. ED 247 310.

In 1981, the Austin Independent School District established a new, more stringent retention policy in its elementary schools. In brief, this policy considers students to be candidates for retention if they are a year or more behind in reading or math. In addition, teachers and principals may make retention decisions based on a variety of other factors, including age, language skills, physical development, social maturity, absence rate, and previous retentions. The new policy has resulted in more than doubling the incidence of retentions—a rise of from 652 students in 1979-80 to 1,443 students in 1981-82.

Using the district's computerized student database and a variety of interviewing instruments, Schuyler describes the impact of the new policy after its first year of operation. Results are mixed, with some analyses showing gains for retained students and others showing that "matched" groups of promoted students fared better.

The Austin study is useful for illustrating a typical district's response to an increase in failing students at a time when "educational excellence" and "educational reform" have become bywords. "The pendulum of educational policy nationwide," says Schuyler, is swinging "towards stricter, more formalized standards and more retentions," and Austin is no exception.

But as Schuyler notes, "the problem of being a low achiever is not avoided" with either of these alternatives, because both retained and promoted low-performing students "progressively grow farther behind their classmates." For this reason she recommends "continued emphasis on meeting the special needs of retainees both during and after the retention year."

## 4 Sandoval, Jonathan, and Hughes, G. Penee. *Success in Nonpromoted First-Grade Children. Final Report.* Davis, California: Dept. of Education, Univ. of California at Davis, June 1981. 212 pages. ED 212 371.

It is widely noted that a decision to retain or promote a particular student should be made only after a careful analysis of what is best for that child. Questions immediately rise, however, about what *is* best for a particular child. What identifiable characteristics of low-achieving students make them better or worse suited for grade retention?

Sandoval and Hughes sought the answer to this question during the spring of 1979 and 1980 by monitoring 84 first-grade children who had been retained under normal school policies. Direct pupil measures included the use of instruments for measuring intellectual functioning, cognitive development, reading achievement, mathematics ability, perceptual-motor functioning, affective social development, and physical height and weight. Measurements also were made of the impact of classroom environment, parental attitudes, and the environment of the home.

To interpret the massive amount of data thereby collected, the researchers went through a lengthy reduction and analysis process, which they document in more than 50 tables and in the accompanying text. Aware of the weaknesses of past research, Sandoval and Hughes confined themselves for the most part to characterizing successful vs. unsuccessful retained students.

In general, the study's findings coincide with what common sense would suggest. The best predictors of success in retained students, the researchers found, are the students' initial levels of academic skills, emotional development, and social adjustment. Those students who were successful in their retained year already had good self-concepts and adequate social skills, but were behind in academic

skills. The retained year gave these students (about 40 percent of the retained group) a chance to catch up academically. The successful students were already "normal" in other ways, too: they had average vocabularies and "parents who were involved in the school and had positive attitudes about retention."

On the other hand, over half of the retained children were "no better off after repeating the first grade," and "had, in effect, lost a year of their lives." "Many of them also...had social and emotional problems that teachers thought (mistakenly) would improve with time." Sandoval and Hughes conclude that low-achieving students with these characteristics should be served by special education. They stress that "retention should not be used as a substitute for special education."

**5 Pheasant, Marilyn.** *Aumsville School District's Readiness Program: Helping First Graders Succeed.* OSSC Bulletin. Eugene, Oregon: Oregon School Study Council, February 1985. 42 pages. ED 254 937.

Many six-year-olds have not yet developed the academic and social skills necessary for succeeding in the first grade. In most school systems, youngsters that old are placed there anyway—and a substantial portion of them are retained the following year. Thus early in the game, these boys and girls are introduced to a self-concept characterized by failure.

The Aumsville (Oregon) School District's first-grade readiness program is designed, says Pheasant, "to assist first graders so that they may have a successful school career." In this program—based in part on Arnold Gesell's theories of child development—all incoming six-year-olds are carefully screened by means of a series of developmental tests administered during the first week of school. Most are then put into a regular first-grade classroom. Some, though, attend "readiness first grade." The following year, these children attend *regular* first grade; thus for them first grade is a two-year experience.

The readiness room curriculum includes a range of academic readiness activities and "the development of motor skills, social skills, and positive self-concept." Although the curriculum is similar to the regular first-grade curriculum, the readiness students study the same skills with different activities, so when they go to the regular first grade, they do not repeat work.

When these students move on to regular first grade, most achieve at either average or above-average levels. Moreover, since they already know the ropes, they often become "room leaders instead of followers" and "room helpers instead of the ones being helped." These differences breed success and positive attitudes toward school.

The readiness program began in fall 1982. At the end of the previous school year (1981-82), 15 percent of first graders were retained. After the readiness program's first year, 5 percent of students who had been assigned to the regular first grade were retained. (The staff was still learning to use screening tests.) After the second year, only one child, whose schoolwork had suffered because of family problems, was retained.

Teachers of the regular first grade classes are "overwhelmingly positive about the program." They experience less stress, have to deal with fewer behavioral problems, and are able to "help the class as a whole through the curriculum without delays caused when trying to catch students up."

*Research Roundup* is issued as a service to members. Copies may be purchased from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091. One copy $2.00; 2-9 copies $1.50 each; 10 or more copies $1.00 each.
**Payment must accompany order.**

(ISSN 8755-2590)
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

U.S. Postage
Permit #8009
Washington, D.C.
Nonprofit
Organization